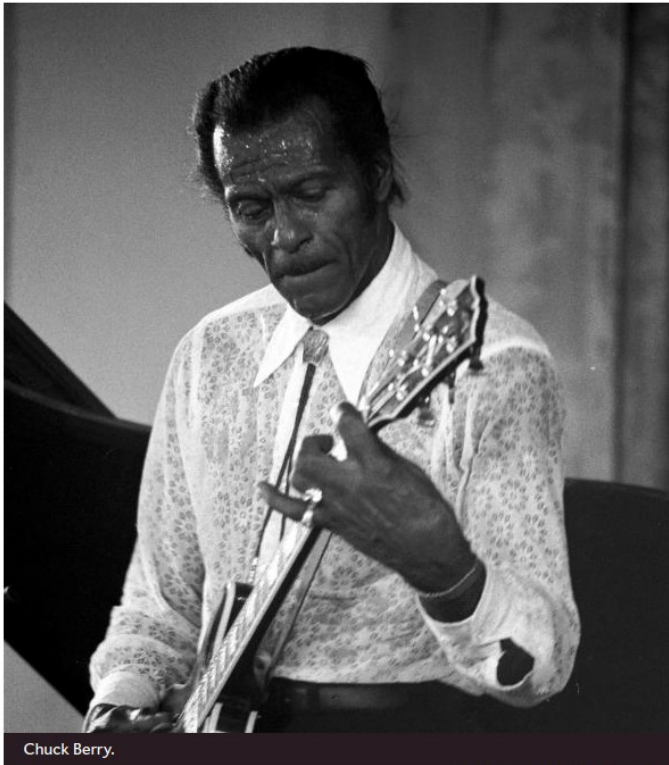


Roll Over, Beethoven

Chuck Berry didn't just invent rock and roll. He perfected it.

By Jack Hamilton

Slate



Chuck Berry.

Roland Godefroy via Wikimedia Commons

Finding the right opener to write about Chuck Berry is a daunting task: After all, among so much else, Berry crafted the greatest “lede” in the history of rock and roll. The furious flurry of twanging, snapping eighth notes that opens Berry’s 1956 hit “Roll Over Beethoven”—and which reappears even more iconically atop 1958’s “Johnny B. Goode”—is to early rock and roll what Louis Armstrong’s trumpet introduction on 1928’s “West End Blues” is to early jazz, a scorched-earth manifesto of craft and virtuosity, laying out the stakes of an audacious new art form. Any consideration of Chuck Berry starts there, with that burst of notes—I count 35 of them, whizzing by in a cool 6 seconds, although I’m on deadline and may have missed a few. Listen closely enough and you’ll hear an entire generation of young people, in the U.S., England, and elsewhere, informing their piano teachers that they’ve decided to switch to electric guitar.

“Who invented rock and roll?” is a truly unanswerable question, but Chuck Berry’s claim is as solid as any. Jackie Brenston’s “Rocket 88,” the 1951 song most frequently cited as the music’s Big Bang, predates Berry’s emergence by four years, and Lloyd Price, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Carl Perkins, and even Elvis Presley had all made records before Berry broke through with “Maybellene” in 1955, at the shockingly advanced age of 28. But Berry was the first to harness the new and unruly sounds into a sort of mission statement for a generation, and many generations after. Years before Berry Gordy Jr. festooned his fledgling Motown Records with the slogan “the Sound of Young

America,” Chuck Berry had worked to make each word of that perfect phrase intelligible. Berry was rock and roll’s first great auteur, blessed with an effortless ability to render the specific into the universal, and vice versa. He wrote songs infused with play, humor, ennui, pain, rage, swagger, and sex. They spoke to a generation who assumed they were about them, which was always only partially true.

Berry possessed many geniuses as a songwriter, but the most consequential was his ability to write songs about being black in America that could double as allegories for being a teenager in America, an audacious bit of rhetorical alchemy that altered popular culture and reverberates to this day. Berry brought the blues into America’s high schools, and somehow did so without sacrificing any of the form’s lyricism, wit, and pathos, even while sometimes sacrificing specificity. According to Berry, the “country boy” of “Johnny B. Goode” was originally written as “colored boy”—Berry changed it to ensure the song got radio play. “Brown Eyed Handsome Man,” written after Berry watched a Latino man in California being harassed by the cops as female companions pleaded his innocence, was originally “Brown Skinned Handsome Man.” And yet there was power in the ambiguity, with Berry’s talent and charisma filling in the blanks. Anyone who’s ever listened to “Johnny B. Goode” and assumed the protagonist is white has issues that are well outside Berry’s purview.

Berry’s gift for language has been widely and justly celebrated, and his ability to render folksy colloquialisms into back-alley poetry is still the standard to which rock lyrics aspire. He wrote lines that are as beautiful to say and sing and write as they are to hear: “You done started

back doing the things you used to do,” from “Maybellene,” a collection of verb tenses that would make Faulkner blush; “He could play the guitar just like a-ringin’ a bell” from “Johnny B. Goode,” a perfect simile of virtuosity and volume; every line of “Roll Over Beethoven” but particularly the “I caught the rollin’ arth-a-ritis sittin’ down at a rhythm revue,” with Chuck inventing a syllable so he can use the word arthritis in a rock and roll song. Or the quick-as-a-wink third verse of “Too Much Monkey Business”: “blond haired, good-lookin’, trying to get me hooked/ want me to marry, get a home, settle down, write a book, aahhhhh,” the audacious image of a blond woman lusting after Berry in 1956, immediately followed by the hilarious image of her nagging him to write a memoir. (Berry actually did publish a very good autobiography in 1988, which will hopefully now come back into print.)

And then of course there was that guitar, the perfect amplified extension of Berry’s intellect. Musical revolutions tend to happen more gradually and subtly than pop mythology would like: For all the claims about “how [x song/album] changed the world,” there are precious few moments on record that you can point to as a precise, tectonic shift in music itself. But Berry’s early hits provide just this. If you listen closely to “Roll Over

Beethoven, “School Days,” “Rock and Roll Music,” “Johnny B. Goode,” or any number of other Berry sides from the period, you’ll hear a rhythm section (usually Chess session bassist Willie Dixon and drummer Fred Below) playing a standard shuffle, the swung eighth-note rhythm that was the most common backdrop of 1940s and 1950s Chicago blues and R&B. Berry and pianist Johnnie Johnson, on the other hand, are playing the arrow-straight eighth notes that would soon become the defining rhythmic currency of rock and roll. It’s a startling clash, the sound of the old world colliding with the new, and once it’s pointed out, the drums and bass on these recordings sound instantly out-of-date, a relic of an earlier era. (For evidence of just how quickly Berry’s sensibility took over, listen to the Beatles’ 1963 cover of “Roll Over Beethoven”—Ringo dispenses with the shuffle completely, and plays the entire song straight.)

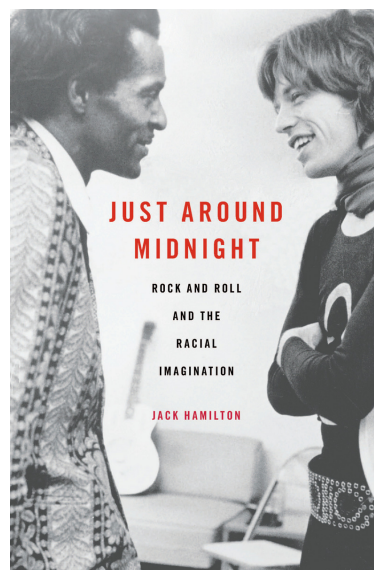


In the “rock” pantheon that emerged out of the 1960s, Berry is too often positioned as a forerunner, rather than at the head of the table where he belongs. The Beatles covered Berry on their second and fourth albums and came back to him at the end of the 1960s,

as they were fracturing: “Get Back” is Chuck through and through. Bob Dylan transformed his career by remaking Berry’s “Too Much Monkey Business” into “Subterranean Homesick Blues” in 1965. The Rolling Stones’ first single was a (bad) cover of Berry’s “Come On,” while their 1969 opus “Gimme Shelter,” one of the greatest rock and roll records ever made, opens with a decelerated revision of the “Roll Over Beethoven” riff. The lyric to Jimi Hendrix’s “Crosstown Traffic” is pure Berry, as is Prince’s rhythm guitar on “When You Were Mine,” and the Purple One’s “Little Red Corvette” is “Maybellene” for the post-disco 1980s. This list could go on forever, which is the whole point.

After his mid-1950s revolution Chuck Berry spent more than 60 years—a near-lifetime on its own terms—living in a world that he himself had made. This was an astounding

achievement, and often a complicated reality. Berry was a deeply flawed human being who sometimes did reprehensible things, and in his later years he often came off as prickly, bitter, and paranoid. To a certain degree this is understandable, particularly in regards to his musical legacy: Chuck Berry lived to see the Rolling Stones, a band who, by their own admission, owe him practically everything, become one of the most lucrative musical acts of all time; he lived to hear the Beatles’ cover of “Rock and Roll Music” become culturally ubiquitous while his own music was relegated to “Oldies” bins; he lived to see Bob Dylan become the first singer-songwriter to win the Nobel Prize in literature, as if a white guy from Minnesota invented the idea that rock and roll could be poetry. Chuck Berry deserved better than all of this, even as his own behavior sometimes made him a difficult person to advocate for.



Last year I published a book about how rock and roll music moved from a genre fundamentally associated with black musicians to a genre fundamentally associated with white ones, a development that’s deeply implicated in everything described above. That’s another story for another several days, but the book’s cover is a photo of Chuck Berry and Mick

Jagger, chatting backstage at a Rolling Stones concert in 1969. It’s a lovely image, shocking in its intimacy, its warmth, its host of overdetermined complexities. The book mostly covers the 1960s, a period in which Berry’s star was already receding, and strictly speaking isn’t really “about” him. But the expression on Jagger’s face, frozen in a youthful mix of laughter, wonder, admiration, and maybe just a dash of discomfort and guilt, tells the real story, the one that’s all about Chuck Berry, the story we all still live in.

www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2017/03/chuck_berry_didn_t_just_invent_rock_and_roll_he_perfected_it.html

For discussion:

1. Summarize this article—how does it go beyond a simple obituary?
2. How did the author organize his material? How does he develop his theme(s)?
3. For what audience is he writing?
4. What will you remember about this article after you have forgotten the details?
5. What should the author have included or left out?

Words and phrases:

opener	to break through	to reverberate	side	lucrative
daunting	to harness	radio play (noun)	shuffle	ubiquitous
lede	unruly	to fill in the blanks	currency	to relocate, be
iconic, iconically	mission statement	folksy	sensibility	relegated
scorched earth	auteur	to nag	to dispense with	oldies
to lay out the stakes	ennui	precious few	to cover	star was receding
on deadline	to double as	tectonic shift	riff	dash (noun)